

Director's Corner

Excerpts from an Interview by Patricia Size of Fr. Harvey on His Trip to Rome

Pat: We are here at our very own offices to talk a little bit about the trip that you just made to Rome this Jubilee year - you were there from February 10th to the 16th?

Fr. Harvey: That's correct, that's when I was there, and it was six days full of all kinds of exciting things. Of course, the most important thing that happened was visiting the Holy Father twice in three days. Through the good graces of two American bishops, I was able on the 14th of February, Valentine's Day, to say Mass with the Pope. It was such a thrill. I knew that this one particular bishop was trying to have me say Mass with the Pope. I wasn't sure it would happen and the night before, Sunday night about 7:30 while I was having supper, the telephone call came through: "Please tell Fr. Harvey to report to the bronze gate on the east side of the Vatican." I went over there the next morning at twenty minutes to seven and got in almost immediately and we waited. They took us upstairs. We had our vestments with us. We vested and by quarter past seven we were ready. The Holy Father was kneeling at the chapel all by himself and then all the laity, forty of them and four priests, we were outside and then we filed in, about five minutes before Mass started. There were four priests - one was a Benedictine from Austria, and I was the one priest from America, and there were two French priests there.

Pat: You were the senior priest concelebrating, right?

Fr. Harvey: I was the senior priest. They put me to the left of the Holy Father. I was very close to the Holy Father and I was walking on air.

We used Latin. We used canon no 2 which is the shortest of the canons. He did not preach, he just prayed for everybody, and I was so thrilled with it all that when it came time for me to say the Prayer for the Faithful Departed for the day, I hadn't seen the Latin text in years, and I began to read the first part which was for a funeral mass. The Pope's secretary cut in on me and said the right one. I was not really embarrassed - I thought "Well, I'm here anyhow, y'know, even if I did start with the wrong prayer and the Bishop continued with the correct one." So the Pope gave us the Kiss of peace, each one of us, and went through the Mass very quietly.

After Mass, we put on our street clothes and our clericals and everyone came to visit the Holy Father in a line, and there were Austrians, there were Germans, there were a few Americans. Brian Benestad of the faculty of Assumption College was there with his daughter Maggie. The Pope talked to each one of us - he didn't talk much, he just let us say who we are and he nodded. I told him I was the Director of Courage - the ministry to homosexual people, and that's all I did say, and he just nodded, and I felt later that I should've said more. But they didn't want you to speak very long. The only person who had a chance to speak was Madame LeJeune, whose husband Jerome died of cancer a few years ago and Madame LeJeune sees the Pope quite often.

She was smart - she was the last one in line and she wasn't pressured by having somebody behind her. So I would advise you if you're ever going to chat with the Pope, stand at the end of the line. In any case, that was Monday and I was quite thrilled by it, and I came out of the audience and I wasn't worried about it.

I'd had breakfast very early in the morning, so I immediately made my way to the Sistine Chapel where I spent two and a half hours - not only at the chapel but the apartments adjoining it. It was also a great thrill for some American visitors - one of them was an artist and she was explaining to her mother and two sisters everything they saw - it was just beautiful - that was Monday.

Then of course, I knew that I was going to be able to see the Pope again at the general audience on Wednesday having written to Archbishop James Harvey, the other American bishop. I was surprised the day before the appointment, on February 15th, when they delivered to my residence a special ticket. I didn't know how special it was. There are 25, 000 people in the square, and I came in and I went on past. "No, no," the Swiss guard said, "Over there, over there." And then all at once it was open space and I showed the little ticket to them. The Swiss Guard saluted me. I went up the empty space, the only one, and there were people on either side. That's where the Pope comes down, you know, that long runway between the sections.

I went up on the stage and I saw an Archbishop, and I said, "Does anybody know Archbishop James Harvey?"

He said "Yes, I'm Archbishop James Harvey and you're Fr. John Harvey - people get us mixed up!" And then he took me over and we sat down. He told me that his good friend, Bishop Raymond Burke of LaCrosse, had asked to have me say Mass, and he took care of that. He said, "I took care of this as well - now you're right up front here, and you'll have a chance to see the Pope a second time."

Then I said to him "Can I have my picture taken with him [Archbishop Harvey] for the sake of my relatives who have the name Harvey?" So he posed for me, and a sixteen year old boy used my camera and took a picture of us.

And then after that, we attended the audience and contrary to all the past reports, the Holy Father may have Parkinson's disease, but his voice was very firm. He spoke for almost an hour in about six or seven different languages, pausing in between, while a priest would introduce a new group - the Ukrainians, the Polish, the Irish, the Scotch - you name it, they're all there. Each time they'd introduce a group, they'd cheer. One group played a band. It was such a delight to be there - a nice sunny day too it was. It went along beautifully.

Then I thought it was all over and you just walk off the stage, but no, no - Archbishop Harvey said to get in line, and we went up to the Pope again, and you knelt down. This time I really told him that I was the Director of Courage which is a ministry to Catholic men and women with

homosexual tendencies. I said we have a very serious program of chastity, and he said "Good!" and that was the end of my conversation - he just said one word - that's okay. [The Holy Father once told David Morrison, Courage member, author, and journalist, that "Courage is doing the work of God," so we already knew the Holy Father supports this ministry.] So I moved out again, walking on air and that was what happened that day.

Pat: How did it feel for you, Fr. Harvey, as a priest, to be able to kiss the ring and concelebrate Mass, all of those different experiences which you were able to share with the Vicar of Christ?

Fr. Harvey: Well, actually, I had hoped to be able to do it, but I didn't want to push it. I figured the Holy Father is not too well, but then at least I'll be at the general audience. Then of course, through the intercession of Patricia Size visiting Bishop Burke, he said "I most certainly will make sure that he has mass with the Pope," and that's how it came about. I was thrilled. I didn't expect Mass with the Pope - that was the most unexpected thing - and not only did I say Mass with the pope but right next to him, on the left hand side - he gave me the kiss of peace. It was the thrill of a life time. I'd never seen him before that close. I was at the beatification of Mother Laoni and that was in 1992, but he was as far away from me then as homeplate is to second base so this time I was so much closer and it was a really beautiful experience. It was a real experience watching the people in the line after the mass - there was one French couple with two children. The Holy Father picked up each of the little girls and kissed them on the forehead. Another had a little baby, and he did the same thing, y'know. He paused for the children - he spent time with children. It was just how sensitive this man is - it was the experience of a lifetime.

I just want to say thank God that I had this privilege and I'm grateful to Bishop Burke and Archbishop James Harvey for what they did. Seeing the Vicar of Christ and seeing him in action, talking to all these different nationalities, going from one language to another and once in a while telling a joke in a particular language - it's just incredible and so contrary to the image the press portrays, of a frail old man pushing along - well, he wasn't frail when I saw him, that's all I can say. There's a vigour there and his mind is so sharp.

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